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The Rev. Les.W. Allen is a Congregational minister who worked for nine years in Papua, New Guinea. For reasons of health he has returned to New Zealand where he is now the minister of the Congregational Church in Whangarei. He gives the following description of his work in the Purari Delta.

EVANGELISTIC WORK AMONG THE PEOPLE OF THE PURARI DELTA PAPUA / NEW GUINEA

The area concerned is about six hundred square miles of tidal swamp land, at no point higher than about three feet above high tide. Living in an environment of mud, mangroves, and nipa palm, some eight thousand people exist at a very primitive level in 18 main villages. The station of the London Missionary Society is set in a small stand of coconut palms at the coast. All travel is by the many waterways, there being no firm land or overland tracks.

The Purari people had not responded to the Gospel in the way in which the Eastern tribes had. These latter had come from darkness into light in a very dramatic way. Many revolutionary changes had come about as a direct result of their response to the Gospel. New standards of health, opportunities for education, technical skills, and the new forms of worship, were all regarded as the fruits of the Gospel. Whole communities were to be led into regular habits of Christian worship and acceptance of Christian ways of life. In the Purari things were vastly different. Changes took place without the church becoming firmly established.

The work of the government, the contacts with traders and other Europeans, and the migrations to plantation labour camps, all helped to bring about important changes of social and economic life. These, and not the church, were the change-facilitating factors. Our presentation of the Gospel was made to a people who were emerging from stone-age conditions; a people desperately seeking the means to improve standards of living.

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On Sundays we usually took some of the men to nearby villages where they would be given opportunities for Christian witness, and this greatly strengthened them in the faith. This also we treated as highly important in our evangelism. It seemed of vital importance that our seekers should from the beginning get into the habit of sharing their experience of the grace of God in Christ.

At the end of the three months period, it was usual to baptise those whom we felt confident as to their personal faith, and to ask any others to remain for a further period. Always, we endeavoured to find men who could go back to their villages as lay readers, to establish worship and witness. It was interesting to find that in some instances, untrained lay readers became more spiritually mature and effective as evangelists, than the better educated and equipped men.

In this work of evangelism we kept in focus two main objectives: the presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the forming of a suitable institution through which the Christian community could express itself in worship and witness. It was of tremendous importance to avoid "pragmatical Christianity" and to root the life of the Church in Christ. The Church's life is derived from Christ, its fellowship is cemented by a common devotion to Christ, its truest theology is that which results from "divinely guided reflection" upon a vital experience of Christ, its mission is directed by Christ, its objectives are defined by Christ, and only in Him can it be consummated. These were our convictions, and they regulated our whole approach to the missionary task.

At the time of our transfer from the Purari to another area, there were barely two hundred Church members; the veriest babes in Christ. The pastoral care of this flock posed some practical difficulties. Some of the questions I asked at the time were:

1. To what extent can we expect these young Christians to behave as Christians, and what forms of discipline are desireable to regulate the moral and spiritual life of the church? The most common form of church discipline was to exclude offenders from the Sacrament of Holy Communion for three months or more. This worried me because I felt that these people needed the means of grace, and such discipline created barriers. In cases where the disciplined person could be placed under pastoral care and encouraged to reach a sense of true penitence, and thus look forward to re-instatement, the discipline could be effective. However, such pastoral care was not always possible, and the "ostracism" often resulted in a hardening of heart and a falling away from the life of the church. This mechanical discipline seemed to have little authority in the New Testament, even though it was used widely. Reforms in church discipline were therefore entered upon, more in line with N.T. teaching.

2. To what extent can we expect these young Christians to function as the Body of Christ, and at what point may we transfer spiritual responsibility to them? By what criteria do we judge the Church to be mature enough for the assumption of responsibility for the administration of its own life and functions? This must be judged by spiritual as well as efficiency standards. I often felt that even though the organisation might be somewhat chaotic, the spiritual life could be mature. We were aware of the fact that even a weak body could still be a fit vehicle for God's revelation. We had always

endeavoured to transfer authority commensurate with the ability and sense of responsibility of the Papuan Christians, but at the same time, we were concerned not to postpone this transfer of responsibility and authority merely on grounds of questioned efficiency or lack of specialised knowledge.

3. How much place could we give to the Papuan Christian's insights. We felt that it was necessary to preserve, along with our understanding of the nature of the corporateness of the Church, the precious truth that simple individuals may be recipients of an authentic personal revelation. It was important therefore to keep our minds open to the possibility that God would speak through some particular Papuan Christian, a word which might not accord with our own views, but nevertheless be the revelation of God's will.

This question arose out of our concern to give some clear guidance to the young Church in the realm of gathered truth - theology. The Christians had a right to the inheritence of the rich tradition of truth which has come down to us through the ages. How to communicate this truth was a practical difficulty which would be solved very gradually, but of immediate concern was the question of the contribution these simple folk could make to our knowledge of truth. If theology at its highest is the product of "divinely guided reflection" upon the personal and corporate reception of a revelation, then we could expect our Papuan Christians to make an acceptable contribution to our knowledge of God.

Of greater importance still, was the way in which theology could influence behaviour. Theology taught as a subject could not be expected to have the impact that one might expect from theology as the account of personal encounters with God. It seemed then that our main business was to encourage the devotional life of our people, so that an indigenous theology would arise out of authentic Christian experience. It was of the first importance to help to create the spiritual climate in which the Papuan Christian could develop in intimacy with his Lord, and in facility in giving expression to his convictions about his Lord.

What of results? We saw Papuans surviving personal crises with unimpaired faith. We saw them cultivating inner springs of holiness. We saw them surmounting tribal and other barriers in the true spirit of Jesus Christ. It was clear that Christ was in the heart, that the ecclesia was being formed. This ecclesia in its search for a vehicle through which to express its life will be led by its Lord to the kind of organisation which will best achieve His will.